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## A Yaminahua Autobiographical Song: *Caqui Caqui*

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### INTRODUCTION

Mariano is a Yaminahua, living in the village of Gasta Bala, along the Purus river in Peru. He had settled there in his old age, after having traveled extensively his whole life. He was born “in the forest,” as he said, at a time when his parents refused any kind of peaceful contact with surrounding groups. He grew up among the many different communities interspersed along the Purus river and its tributaries. He later went to work in Sepahua, a small *mestizo* town, built around a Dominican mission, where he spent many years with his first wife. When she died, Mariano came back to Purus and settled among the Sharanahua. He had met a new wife, a widow, and together they decided to found an independent household, without children.

In 2001, when I first met Mariano, he was already quite old. He had the reputation of being one of the best singers in the community and the sound of his songs regularly filled the air around his house. These songs, unlike those I was beginning to know well through my research on shamanic ritual, bore no relation to shamanism. They were, in a certain way, “profane.” They made no mention of any kind of “supernatural being,” neither in the content of their utterances, nor in the conditions of their performance. Instead the songs focused, through thickly veiled language, on the various life episodes of their singer, and were all imbued with a strong feeling of nostalgia. In effect, these songs pertained to the tradition of Yaminahua autobiography.

The present essay aims to analyze one of these sibylline songs in order to gain insight into the tradition as a whole. The first two sections describe the ethnographic context and my theoretical frame. Next, I examine the context of the song’s performance and its mode of transmission. The actual text of the song is then thoroughly analyzed, thus enabling the reader

to understand its narrative content, decipher its cryptic language, and reconstruct its pragmatic implications. I then discuss the paradox of an autobiographical narrative as it is transmitted through codified traditional songs.

## **YAMINAHUA AND SHARANAHUA**

The Yaminahua, similar to the Sharanahua with whom they live, speak a language in the Panoan family. Their villages, consisting of around 150 inhabitants each, are scattered along the Peruvian banks of the Purus river in the middle of the Amazonian forest. There are 650 people, who are broadly divided among the two communities. Their neighbors are other Panoan groups, such as the Mastanahua, the Amahuaca, and the Cashinahua, and also the Arawa speaking Madiha (Culina) and the Arawak speaking Yine (Piro). The information presented in this paper comes from a single village, named Gasta Bala, where I spent nineteen months between October 2001 and August 2004.

The Sharanahua appeared in the region around the middle of the last century, having come from the Jurua tributaries. The Yaminahua arrived later and did not really settle as an autonomous community. The majority now live in Sharanahua villages. Culturally, the Sharanahua and the Yaminahua are extremely similar, especially after many years of cohabitation. Owing to this cultural similarity, the Yaminahua tradition of autobiographical songs is the same as that of the Sharanahua. Their mode of subsistence today is also the same. They cultivate manioc and plantains and they hunt and fish, all of which are highly valued activities.

## **AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND TRADITIONAL DISCURSIVE GENRES IN THE AMAZON**

The question addressed in this essay is the following: in what way can an autobiography be traditional? I am not concerned with the historical value of autobiography as a discursive genre (which is another issue in itself). I will be looking at the fact that, in some traditions, including Amazonian ones, personal autobiography can be expressed through fixed discursive forms. This means that the language of the autobiography can, in certain cases, be inherited and repeated, and that, in so far as it should provide an account of personal experiences, this may appear somewhat paradoxical. This is why, before examining the Yaminahua autobiographical tradition per se, it is necessary to look more closely at the discursive context in which it is embedded.

Lawrence Watson and Maria-Barbara Watson-Franke define autobiography in contrast to life history:

As we see it, the 'life history' is any retrospective account by the individual of his life in whole or part, in written or oral form, *that has been elicited or prompted by another person* ... We use the term "autobiography," by contrast, to refer to a person's *self-initiated* retrospective account of his life, which is usually but not always in written form (1985:2).

Such a contrastive definition implies that the distinction between self and other should enable us to understand what an autobiography is. However, I need a definition adapted to the Amazonian discursive situation. I follow Watson and Watson-Franke by trying first to define what autobiography is not, but diverge from their categories in pursuit of a definition more adapted to indigenous lowland cultural ideas. This definition is, however, useful only for the purpose of analysis and has no emic value as such.

Narratives that describe actions carried out by a character other than the narrator/subject are not, strictly speaking, autobiographies. These types of narratives depict events and actions involving characters that the narrator evokes in the third person ("she" or "he"). In Amazonian cultures, such narratives can, broadly speaking, be classed as "historical" or "mythical." This distinction essentially rests on epistemological considerations that are largely defined by the narratives' conditions of enunciation. Hence, historical narratives can be either "secondhand narratives," in which the responsibility of the discourse is transferred to a "she" or a "he" (for instance, the one who transmitted the narrative) or "firsthand discourse," in which the responsibility of the discourse is taken on entirely by the "I" form used by the narrator. By contrast, mythical narratives are *always* secondhand discourses. They are always attributed to another enunciator, that is, the person who taught the narrative to the narrator (see Ireland 1988, Gow 2001<sup>1</sup>) and/or the ancestral being who held firsthand knowledge of the described events (Déléage 2005).

A category of autobiography can be defined in contrast to the historical narratives described above. Autobiographical narratives in this category recount actions that were performed by the narrators themselves. The "I" of the discourse here refers *simultaneously* to the main character of the narrative *and* to its source of authority. Such narratives, in Amazonian societies, would include for instance shamanic initiation narratives (e.g., Oakdale 2005) or narratives of warrior achievements (e.g., Hendricks 1993; Basso 1995). These narratives use traditional genres. Various aspects of their thematic and formal structures can be understood as transmitted, inherited, and repeated. However, they are explicitly thought

of and represented by their narrator as personal narratives, i.e., as narrating personal experiences.

A second category of autobiography introduces a new complexity at the level of its conditions of enunciation. These autobiographies, which usually take the form of songs, are highly formal in content and retain validity only under certain, specific conditions that bring a “ritual” quality to the discourses. These narratives are autobiographical in that they use the pronoun “I” in their enunciation, but also because they refer to experiences explicitly presented as personal and actually experienced by the narrator. The “I,” however, highly problematic here. In effect, the source of authority of these inherited and repeated discourses is not their actual speaker but someone identified as *another* person, i.e., the person originally responsible for the “I” of the discourse (see Du Bois 1986). In an Amazonian context, this “other person” can be an auxiliary spirit in shamanic songs (Severi 2002; Déléage 2005; Oakdale 2005), an enemy in war songs (Fausto 2001; Viveiros de Castro 2002; Oakdale 2005) or even an ancestral being in certain ritual songs where mythic events are actually experienced by the speaker (Urban 1989; Graham 1995).<sup>2</sup> These contradictory conditions of enunciation define a second category of autobiography where the “I” is, or becomes, an “other.”

While transcribing and translating the Yaminahua autobiographical songs, it appeared to me that there was also a third category of autobiography. The songs making up this last category are entirely inherited and repeated using highly stylized language (unlike songs in the first category), but they were not attributed to another specified enunciator (such are the songs in the second category). They constituted another category that I shall endeavor to define.

### WHY DO THE YAMINAHUA SING?

There are two primary moments when a man or woman can decide to sing an autobiographical song. Most of the time, the songs are sung when a person feels deeply nostalgic, such as when poignant memories appear to the mind of the singer. These can be memories of a lost love, of travels far away from home, or of youth long gone. In any case, the memory must be linked to an event that is distant in space and time. At these times, it is said that one “thinks a lot” (*/shina ichapa/*). The songs are a way of expressing feeling and of binding the memories in a melodious narrative.

The elders say that in earlier times these songs played an important role in acts of seduction. Through their cryptic language, the songs enabled the

singer to express their feelings to someone without having to do so directly, in crude day-to-day language. The songs expanded on the qualities of the loved one or on those of the singer (or both). Today, seduction no longer involves this indirect means of communication. Young people no longer experience the need to learn such a complicated language, let alone one filled with terms whose meaning and motivation have now largely disappeared.<sup>3</sup>

All the songs I was able to listen to or to record were sung at moments when the speakers were sad and nostalgic. They were not addressed to anybody in particular and were usually sung during the late afternoon in the isolation of the house. From the singer's point of view, this was the correct way to express strong feelings.<sup>4</sup>

Notice here that the same songs, composed of the same words, can, according to the occasion, express the heartfelt sadness of a memory or the boundless joy of seduction. It is therefore impossible to understand these songs without keeping in mind the overall circumstances of their performance. The text of the song alone is simply not enough. Context thus constitutes the first indexical character of these songs. The words of the song in themselves do not convey all of the intended meaning. In order to interpret the full meaning, it is necessary first to take into account the speaker's intention.

### LEARNING CAQUI CAQUI SONGS

Due to its form and content, the song presented here belongs to a particular discursive genre. It is a song that praises the past personal qualities of its enunciator. However, there is no specific Yaminahua name to designate this genre. The Yaminahua just say *fana*, which means "song." Sometimes, in response to my questions, the term "*Caqui Caqui*" was used. This refers to the chorus of the song, but is a term that is far from being universally accepted. The chorus, it should be noted, is totally meaningless. It is merely used to give rhythm to the speech act, and to separate one line from the other. This song genre contrasts with the *Yama Yama* song genre that focuses on living people that the singer has loved—relatives living in a remote village or a past lover—rather than describing the enunciators. "*Caqui Caqui*" is seemingly more autobiographical because it focuses on the singer alone.

The language of these two song genres is incomprehensible to those who do not know how to decipher the coded system that is used to compose them. For this reason, these songs must be explicitly learned. They are

considered by those who sing them as a specific discursive activity, set apart from the verbal interactions of daily life. From this point of view, they are akin to Yaminahua and Sharanahua shamanistic songs, which are characterized by the same kind of opacity. However, it should be pointed out that in the case of shamanistic songs, opacity results from an intention to demonstrate the nonhuman origin of the song to the uninitiated listener. In the case of the *Caqui Caqui*, there is no essential justification, according to the Yaminahua, for the use of opaque language. The only context in which this opacity becomes productive is that of seduction, where the aim is to communicate as indirectly as possible by using allusion or euphemism.

How then, does learning take place? I never observed any situation, remember, in which knowledge of the songs was transmitted. Nevertheless, I obtained various descriptions of teaching situations from a number of old men and women. The narratives were always the same: one day, the father of the speaker (or mother if the speaker was a woman) decided to teach their child the technique of autobiographical songs. They took the child to an isolated and quiet part of the house. Then the father (or mother) introduced the songs using this formula: "One day, you will sing like this. That is the way my own father/mother taught me." After saying this, the parent started to sing and the child had to repeat the words in order to learn the song by heart. When the child had a problem with the opacity of one expression or another, the parent would explain: "This means that and that means this." In this way, young learners would gradually understand the meaning of the "metaphors" to be used later in their own songs, and would develop an understanding of other people's autobiographical songs. The importance of this way of learning is that the Yaminahua themselves think of it as imitation. The learners do not improvise a song based on a transmitted schema. Rather, they repeat, verbatim, the words of their parental master. It is the exactness of this repetition that not only places the song in the *Caqui Caqui* tradition, but also enables an aesthetic judgment to be made by Yaminahua. The words of the song are thus, in a certain way, only quotations of the words of the master. The chants are traditional inasmuch as they are repeated exactly, and it is this repetition that enables them to be recognized and classified. This phenomenon is highly problematic when taking into account the fact that the songs are meant to be "autobiographical," because, a priori, they are very personal and singular. In order to understand this paradox it is essential to be familiar with the content of at least one of the songs of this tradition. Let us now turn to the translation of one such song.



THE TEXT OF THE *CAQUI CAQUI* SONG*Singer: Mariano*

1	<i>un shafa dacuscaido caqui caqui</i>	when I used to get up at dawn
	<i>shafa dacuscaido caqui caqui</i>	when I used to get up at dawn
	<i>un funamari shafari caqui caqui</i>	early in the morning
	<i>icho caicahuatan caqui caqui</i>	I used to walk fast
5	<i>un ubuun camu yoshini caqui caqui</i>	with my <i>yoshi</i>
	<i>un butucubucahuatan caqui caqui</i>	I would rub my hands
	<i>un raomashofo caqui caqui</i>	I would clear
	<i>un furu taparatatan caqui caqui</i>	I would weed
	<i>un furu taparatatan caqui caqui</i>	I would weed
10	<i>ubuun camu yoshini caqui caqui</i>	with my <i>yoshi</i>
	<i>un butarimumahuashon caqui caqui</i>	I would rub my hands
	<i>un difo yoshi baditi caqui caqui</i>	the trees joined the <i>yoshi</i>
	<i>un difo yoshi baditi caqui caqui</i>	the trees joined the <i>yoshi</i>
	<i>un datiopahuashon caqui caqui</i>	in spite of my short height
15	<i>un atiqui huahuaquin caqui caqui</i>	I would do this
	<i>un difo yoshi baditi caqui caqui</i>	the trees joined the <i>yoshi</i>
	<i>un funu yoshi baditi caqui caqui</i>	the man joined the <i>yoshi</i>
	<i>un funu munihuushofin caqui caqui</i>	I would grab the man
	<i>un funu munihuushofin caqui caqui</i>	I would grab the man
20	<i>un ohui yuyuibadi caqui caqui</i>	I would make him raise his voice
	<i>un cohui potoibadi caqui caqui</i>	I would make him breathe out his dust
	<i>un chapo mana caicho caqui caqui</i>	when the crickets were leaving
	<i>un mana fiancudi caqui caqui</i>	I would take possession of the plateau
	<i>un datiopahuashon caqui caqui</i>	in spite of my short height
25	<i>un atuqui huahuaquin caqui caqui</i>	I would do this
	<i>ua ibi odipa caqui caqui</i>	my human being of blood
	<i>abuun yora shinashon caqui caqui</i>	thinking of her
	<i>un shico mahua yoraya caqui caqui</i>	the tall body of the plantains
	<i>un funu munihuushofin caqui caqui</i>	I would grab the man
30	<i>uncaí robahuahuadi caqui caqui</i>	I would sow a lot
	<i>ua ibi odipa caqui caqui</i>	my human being of blood
	<i>abuun yora oshofin caqui caqui</i>	her white body
	<i>un abuun aba roafo caqui caqui</i>	for the Roa, it is nothing
	<i>uncaí robahuashodi caqui caqui</i>	I would sow a lot
35	<i>un shico mahua yoraya caqui caqui</i>	the tall body of the plantains
	<i>uncaí robahuahuadi caqui caqui</i>	I would sow a lot
	<i>un oso pora yoraya caqui caqui</i>	the body of the white vine
	<i>uncaí robahuahuadi caqui caqui</i>	I would sow a lot
	<i>ua ibi odipa caqui caqui</i>	my human being of blood
40	<i>abuun yora shinashon caqui caqui</i>	thinking of her
	<i>un oso pora yoraya caqui caqui</i>	the body of the white vine
	<i>uncaí robahuahuadi caqui caqui</i>	I would sow a lot



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<i>un yohuu furo cuduya caqui caqui</i>	the sorcerer's decorated eyes
<i>uncaí robahuahuadi caqui caqui</i>	I would sow a lot
45 <i>un yohuu furo cuduya caqui caqui</i>	the sorcerer's decorated eyes
<i>uncaí robahuahuadi caqui caqui</i>	I would sow a lot
<i>ua icon shafohuun caqui caqui</i>	as my mother raised me
<i>un pofu diacoincu caqui caqui</i>	upright and doughty
<i>un atiqui huahuaguin caqui caqui</i>	I would do this
50 <i>un abuun doi ocushon caqui caqui</i>	a long time ago
<i>"uquiroco odipon" caqui caqui</i>	"in front of me, grow up"
<i>"un budoroco odipon" caqui caqui</i>	"Budo, grow up!"
<i>un aforo huadicu caqui caqui</i>	she said to me
<i>uhuun pofu datoi caqui caqui</i>	my doughty man said
55 <i>uhuun pofu datoi caqui caqui</i>	my doughty man said
<i>"uquiroco odipon" caqui caqui</i>	"in front of me, grow up"
<i>"uhuun adu odipon" caqui caqui</i>	"my name, grow up!"
<i>ua maihuadicu caqui caqui</i>	thus he spoke to me
<i>ua ibi odipa caqui caqui</i>	my human being of blood
60 <i>un abuun yora shinashon caqui caqui</i>	thinking of her
<i>un abuun aba roafo caqui caqui</i>	for the Roa, it is nothing
<i>uncaí robahuashodi caqui caqui</i>	I would sow a lot

## GENERAL OVERVIEW

As is evident, the text is difficult to understand upon a first reading. Clearly, one can identify the various criteria that define what anthropologists might term "traditional chants:" a melodic structure, a metric pattern, many repetitions and the presence of terms largely devoid of meaning (e.g., *caqui caqui*). However, these are not what makes understanding difficult. The cryptic nature of the song does not stem from the use of an "archaic" vocabulary, nor from the borrowing of terms from a foreign language (as is often the case). Rather, the song involves a sort of code in which one term is understood by the initiated to stand for another.

Still, the song is not entirely cryptic, and it is possible, upon a first hearing or reading, to get a general idea of what it describes. Mariano describes himself as he was during his youth. He narrates his daily activities at that time (1–46, 59–62). He would get up early in the morning (1–3, 22), would go rapidly toward his garden (4), and would rub his hands (6, 11) before picking up his axe (5, 10). With the axe, he would clear and weed his garden (7–9), cutting down the trees (12–13, 16–19, 23) that would fall noisily to the ground (20) and produce a cloud of dust (21). He would then sow plantains (28–30, 35–36), make manioc cuttings (37–38, 41–42), and again sow maize (43–46). This gardening activity was done

for his wife and it was done “thinking of her” (26–27, 31–32, 39–40, 59–60).

But this self-description is not limited to these daily activities. The subject is also Mariano’s own youth more generally. He describes himself as hardworking, despite his short stature (14–15, 24–25). He states that for those who belong to his exogamous moiety, the *roa adifo*, this was not really tiring work (33, 61). Mariano also mentions what his mother and father would “say” to him, e.g., “Grow up!” (51–58).

### BREAKING THE YAMINAHUA CODE

Moving beyond the general overview of the autobiographical content of the song, it is necessary to look more closely at the lexical substitutions that are made. The first one appears in the fifth line (and then again in the tenth): the term “*yoshi*” is used to designate the singer’s axe. This term can signify in Yaminahua, “spirit” or, in this context, “reflection.”<sup>25</sup> This substitution can possibly be explained by the fact that an axe provides a surface that can act as a mirror. But this trope may also be a reference to any artifact, which, at the time of Mariano’s childhood, when the Yaminahua were isolated, would have come from an unknown exterior that was inhabited by “foreigners.” In many Amazonian cultures, foreigners, with their unknown commodities, are often associated more generally with “spirits.” The term “*yoshi*” is also used in a very different sense: “the trees joined the *yoshi*” (lines 12, 13, and 16). Here, the term simply signifies “dead,” which is very close to the conventional meaning. The sentence might then be understood as follows: “the trees were joining the dead trees.” This could be taken to mean: “I was cutting down the trees.”

In order to make the trees fall, Mariano had to grab their trunks with his bare hands, and to be able to shake them hard. To express this action, the song uses the following phrase: “I would grab the man” (18–19, 29), where the term “man” (*funu*) actually means “tree.” The logic of this substitution is developed in the next line where, instead of evoking the “noise” of the falling tree, Mariano talks about its “voice” (*ohui*), which normally concerns only humans. In that case, the substitution could be interpreted to be a common metaphor because it is known to the whole speech community. Indeed, all the Yaminahua are aware that, in traditional discourse, men are “trees,” whereas women are “hills” (*mana*). In this song, the metaphor is just inverted. Line 22, “when the crickets were leaving,” is a way of referring to the time of day when these night insects become quiet. It can be understood as a poetic way of saying, “early in the morning” (3).

The dead wife of the singer is referred to (26, 31, 39, 59) by another substitution: “human being of blood” (*/ibi odi-/*). Among the Yaminahua, it is impolite to pronounce the proper name of the dead. One can only make allusion to them. But this prohibition appears here as one more instance in a series of substitutions. The logic motivating this substitution seems quite difficult to reconstruct and nobody was able to explain it to me. Instead, they cut short my inquiries by responding simply, “that’s what we say.”

The lines of the *Caqui Caqui* song discussed above are followed by a series of similar substitutions concerning plants. Cultivated plants are each denoted by a standardized formula in this system of Yaminahua poetics.<sup>6</sup> The following are three ways of referring to plants that follow the formulae of X Y Z + clitic:

- [A] *shico mahua yora-ya* (28, 35)
- [B] *osho pora yora-ya* (37, 41)
- [C] *yohuu furo cudu-ya* (43, 45)

Phrase A signifies literally “the plantain (*shico*) tall (*mahua*) body (*yora*).”<sup>7</sup> The term “*shico*” is either an archaic term denoting the plantains (which today are called *mania* or *coti*) or a lexical substitution, the reason for which has been lost during the process of transmission. It must also be noted that the use of the term “*yora*” to designate the “body” of a plant is very unusual in Yaminahua language. The term “*caya*” is usually employed to refer to the “body” of the plant, whereas “*yora*” is restricted to describing human beings.

Phrase B can be translated literally as, “the vine (*pora*) white (*osho*) body (*yora*).” The term “*pora*” usually designates a small vine, but when associated with the term “*osho*,” it refers to manioc. There is no small vine that is more literally labeled “*pora*,” which is, in fact, white. Manioc, a tuber, is usually not classified as “*pora*.”

Finally, phrase C signifies literally: “the sorcerer’s (*yohuu*) decorated (*cuduya*) eyes (*furo*).” Once again, the motivation for the use of the term “*furo*,” which normally means “maize,” and that here stands for “eyes” is hard to determine. I know that the term “*furo*” can also signify “seed.” This fact leads me to guess that the term could refer to the maize seed. Given this association, the portion translated as “eyes are decorated” could be interpreted as follows: the maize seeds contained in the ear are covered with leaves that are like Yaminahua ornaments. The reason for the association of “decorated eyes” with “sorcerer” also remains a mystery to me.

While deciphering the substitutions themselves is not a problem, a reconstruction of their current existence remains a difficult task, for the singer or the anthropologist. This phenomenon is linked to the problematic status of enunciation characteristic of the *Caqui Caqui* songs. These songs are certainly autobiographical, narrating the memories of the one who pronounces them, but at the same time, they are traditional chants, repeated words, and an imitation of the elders. Herein lies the paradox of the tradition. In order to understand what is autobiographical in these songs, something else within the song must be examined: the description of the enunciator.

### THE ENUNCIATOR IN THE *CAQUI CAQUI* SONGS

The “I” in the song presented above is explicitly characterized in several ways and by extension (given that these songs are understood to be autobiographical) so is the singer. To begin with, the “I” is characterized in Yaminahua ethical terms. The “I” is “a hard worker,” as well as “upright and doughty” (48), and someone who has a hope of seducing a woman. The “I” also understates his accomplishments. About the difficulty of weeding, he says: “it is nothing for me” (33, 61). By referring to weeding, the gender of the “I” is stated as well. According to the Yaminahua division of labor, men weed gardens and their wives cultivate and then cook the plantains, manioc, or maize.

The “I” is also characterized as belonging to one of the two exogamous moieties that continue to organize Yaminahua society today. With respect to the performance of this particular song, Mariano indicates that the “I” belongs to the *roa adifo* (the “perfect elders”) and not to the *nahua facufo* (the “foreign children”). The identity of the “I” is thus absorbed within the general dual-classification system.

The biological parents of the “I,” and by extension of the enunciator, are mentioned in the song. It states that they gave him parts of his social identity. Along with transmitting his doughtiness (48, 54–55), his father is described as giving him a proper name, probably his own father’s, “Budo” (52, 57). For this reason, while the mother of the “I” uses his proper name, the father names him, by metonymy, “my name” (57). Proper names are transmitted through the patriline, similar to moiety affiliation, but they skip a generation, passing, for example, from a man to his grandson. The utilization of the proper name of the enunciator should thus not be understood as a process of “singularization.” Rather, it is a way of emphasizing the social connection of the singer to the patriline.

The song also includes the quoted speech of “parents.” In this rendition, Mariano’s dead parents offer only one injunction—“Grow up!”—that summarizes the extent of the control they have exerted on their child’s development. The verb “to grow” (*/ico-/*), whose meaning is cultural as well as natural, is used once in the song (47). But, in his parents’ direct speech, another lexeme is employed, */odi-/*, which usually means “shape/make” or “transform.” In this case it signifies, first, that his parents have contributed to his physical growth by feeding him, and, second, that they have made him “upright and doughty” and that they educated him in the right way (that is, in a way befitting all the members of the *roa adifo* moiety). This development, this shaping or transformation should be understood simultaneously as biological and cultural.<sup>8</sup>

In summary, the song describes an “I” who is a hardworking adult member of a moiety with an inherited name. Only by having these characteristics can any singer, and Mariano in particular, acquire the legitimacy required to publicly sing this *Caqui Caqui*. In other words, to the extent that the words of the song are repeated, it is up to the enunciator to make the necessary effort to correspond to the (auto)biographical ideal expressed by the content of the song. This seems to be exactly the reverse of what is commonly understood by “autobiography.” In common assumptions about autobiography, the subject attempts to reconstruct a personal and genuine past. In this *Caqui Caqui* song, the subject attempts to reach a type of normative future shared by all men in his moiety.

## DISCUSSION

In what way can the *Caqui Caqui* songs be characterized as “autobiographical”? The truth is that they do not contain any reference to the singer’s unique identity as such. The actions described are those carried out by all Yaminahua men and the “I” is only defined as a man belonging to one of the two moieties. Even his proper name is just a duplication of the moiety system, which, at most, characterizes a social position. In a nutshell, all the words of a *Caqui Caqui* songs could be sung by someone else and, in fact, were effectively sung by all those who have previously transmitted them. At the heart of this process of imitation and repetition—a process explicitly recognized as such—lies the aim of the songs: to enable the expression of a deeply personal emotion. Philippe Lejeune defined autobiographical narrative using only one constitutive criterion (“*une affaire de tout ou rien*”).<sup>9</sup> For an autobiography to qualify as such, there has to be “continuity of identity between the author and the

narrator” (Lejeune 1989:5). It is clear that, according to this definition, the Yaminahua *Caqui Caqui* songs are autobiographical. Mariano speaks of his own life as continuous with that of the ancestral author of the song when he sings. His own life is also presented as identical (with respect to these features) to the lives of all his ancestors who have sung this same *Caqui Caqui* song.

The strange feature of the *Caqui Caqui* songs does not reside in the nature of their conditions of enunciation. What appears strange to us is the fact that the words of the song—its exact content—are *entirely repeated*.<sup>10</sup> All the Yaminahua singers emphasized that their songs are accurate copies of their parents’ songs and that their parents’ songs were accurate copies of their own parents’ songs, et cetera. This means that not only is the form of the songs understood to be the same, but that the meaning of the coded language is understood also to be the same over time. The same maize is designated by the substitution “sorcerer’s decorated eyes,” and the same position of “wife of the enunciator” is expressed by the phrase “human being of blood.” The signifier and the signified of these songs are both inherited and reproduced with accuracy, a phenomenon that is made easier by the formulaic structure and the cryptic logic of the discourse.

Wherein, then, lies the autobiography? I suggest that it is in the “indexicality” of the song. I have argued that it was essential to know the context of the enunciation in order to understand the intended function of the song as an expression of emotion or as a means of indirect communication. But there is a second sense in which the indexicality of the song is important, particularly with respect to fulfilling the autobiographical function of the *Caqui Caqui*. When a singer repeats a *Caqui Caqui* song, the signifier and the signified stay the same, but the referent of the song changes radically. The “I” of the enunciation expresses singularity only when a singer, such as Mariano, pronounces it in a given place and at a given time. In these circumstances, the “I” refers to Mariano. The expression “human being of blood” refers to Mariano’s dead wife only when Mariano takes on the responsibility for the “I.” The unique autobiographical value of the songs is thus “indexical.” When this indexical grounding of the “I” pronoun is adopted by a singer, all the lines of the repeated song become a reference to the speaker’s own past, that is, each line points to one of Mariano’s past actions and not somebody else’s. This is why, in the song presented here, the words refer to Mariano gardening and, in a general way, all the words refer to a series of past episodes from the singer’s own life. Thus, the song becomes autobiographical from beginning to end.

What we are dealing with here is a third category of Amazonian autobiographical discourse. The *Caqui Caqui* is not a discourse defined



by the simple distinction between the “I” of the song’s lyrics and the actual speaker of the “I.” In other words, the singer of the song, and previous singers of the song, are referenced equally. It is not a form of discourse that is simply sung or animated by the singer but authored and/or authorized by another (be it a spirit, a dead person, or an ancestor). Here, the “I” of the *Caqui Caqui* can only be defined as a “traditional I,” which refers not just to one speaker, but to a whole Yaminahua moiety of men or women, past and present, who have all previously inhabited the position of the “singer” with respect to the particular *Caqui Caqui* song.

This makes it possible to compare the Yaminahua *Caqui Caqui* with the Kayabi *Jawosi* songs. As Oakdale (2005:188) describes them, these songs, couched in opaque language, are *inherited*, for instance from an uncle who once expressed his own personal experience (“to sing *Jawosi* is to repeat *Jawosi*”). These songs also serve to express the personal experience of the singer who repeats them without any formal modification of the words. The words of a song that originally narrated a journey to the Peixes River, sung again by another singer in the following generation, may refer to a migration to the Xingu Park. The song remains the same, but the referent changes. A third analytic category, then, comprises two very different traditions: the Yaminahua *Caqui Caqui* and the Kayabi *Jawosi*. I believe that this genre, or enunciation device, is probably more widespread in the Amazon basin.

From a less discursive point of view, it is important to note that this institutionalized device makes the most personal of experiences come to life in the most rigid form possible without losing any of its emotional weight. These songs move their singers—who insist on the powerful sentiments involved in the performance—to tears. Autobiography, according to the Yaminahua, is absolutely not the reconstruction of a personal experience within a singular form. Rather, it is the inscription of such an experience within a standardized form. For this to occur, the singer must identify, by focusing on the future, with an ethical ideal and the norms governing the society to which he belongs. Learning *Caqui Caqui* songs is thus learning to sing one’s own future. It is also learning about the ethical ideal one must achieve in order to claim legitimacy as the enunciator. This phenomenon can be seen in the temporal marking of the song, which makes it possible, on the one hand, to understand the song as a quotation that is marked by a remote past (“a long time ago”), and on the other hand the quotations within the song that are marked by a near future (“grow up!”). Learning what the Yaminahua see as the “good life” also involves a projection of the self into the future, that is, one learns the songs that after a natural and cultural process of aging, will one day correspond to what one *must*



live. When that day arrives, the singer will be able to express, with all the necessary authority, the relationship between their own life and the “good life” as defined by Yaminahua society.

In this sense, this third category of Amazonian autobiography can intertwine past and future using the same rhetoric. This is a property the Yaminahua form shares with other Amazonian discursive genres. For example, as Basso noticed in the Xingu:

Kalapalo historical narratives that are biographical incorporate various rhetorical functions, including, most importantly, remembering, reminding, and explaining. The importance of these rhetorical functions rests in the fact that they encourage people to project forward while at the same time they look to the past. For the individual, projecting forward involves the process of coming to understand certain aspects of the self so as to find the right solution to a mental problem (1989:21).

I believe that my analysis here may apply to many autobiographies of the Amazon that are couched in some kind of traditional rhetoric. The originality of the *Caqui Caqui*, and of the more general third category of autobiography defined in this essay, is that this process takes place as singers think about the conditions under which they have the authority to sing these types of songs.

## NOTES

1. According to Peter Gow, among the Yine, “in established secondhand narratives, the narrator invariably states the source of the story. Such marking of source establishes the probable veracity of the narrative in absence of personal experience by referring it to ties of close kin status” (2001:83). See also what a Wauja said to Emilienne Ireland, talking about the truth of the events described by a myth: “People didn’t witness these things, after all. They’ve only heard about them for a very long time” (Ireland 1988:163).

2. Greg Urban characterized a category of first-person narrative that is very close to this second category defined here. He writes, “There is a kind of ‘de-quotative “I”’, where the anaphoric ‘I’ of quotation, through a kind of theatrical substitution, becomes again a referential index, but this time pointing to the speaker not with respect to the speaker’s everyday identity or self, but rather with respect to an identity the speaker assumes through the text” (1989:27). In a North American context, Donald Bahr et al. comment on the art of Pima poetry: “The ‘I’s’ of song texts must be read in the first place as ‘I the mythic person spirit who now sings in your dream’” (1997:169).

3. The Yaminahua autobiographical songs closely resemble the songs of the Scandinavian Laplanders. The latter, termed *juoigis*, can either be a means

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to express feelings (generally nostalgia) or an indirect communication device. They are based on proper names, which are often generic (describing lineage or character), and are sung in a cryptic language that also needs to be learnt (Delaporte and Roué 1989).

4. My request to record the songs was not seen as problematic in any way.

5. See Déléage 2005, chapter 2.

6. See Déléage 2005, chapter 5.

7. The clitic /-ya/ is a genitive; I do not translate it here.

8. It would be useful in future work to come back to an interesting aspect of the parents quoted speech. This speech is marked by an imperative that also has the value of a near future (/~pon/). This fact contrasts sharply with the temporal marking, by default, of the song, which is a remote past (/~di/).

9. I translate this to mean: "a question of all or nothing."

10. This is true with the exception of the proper name of the speaker.

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